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OCTOBER 23, 1890.

No. 64.

STREET & SMITH, Publishers.

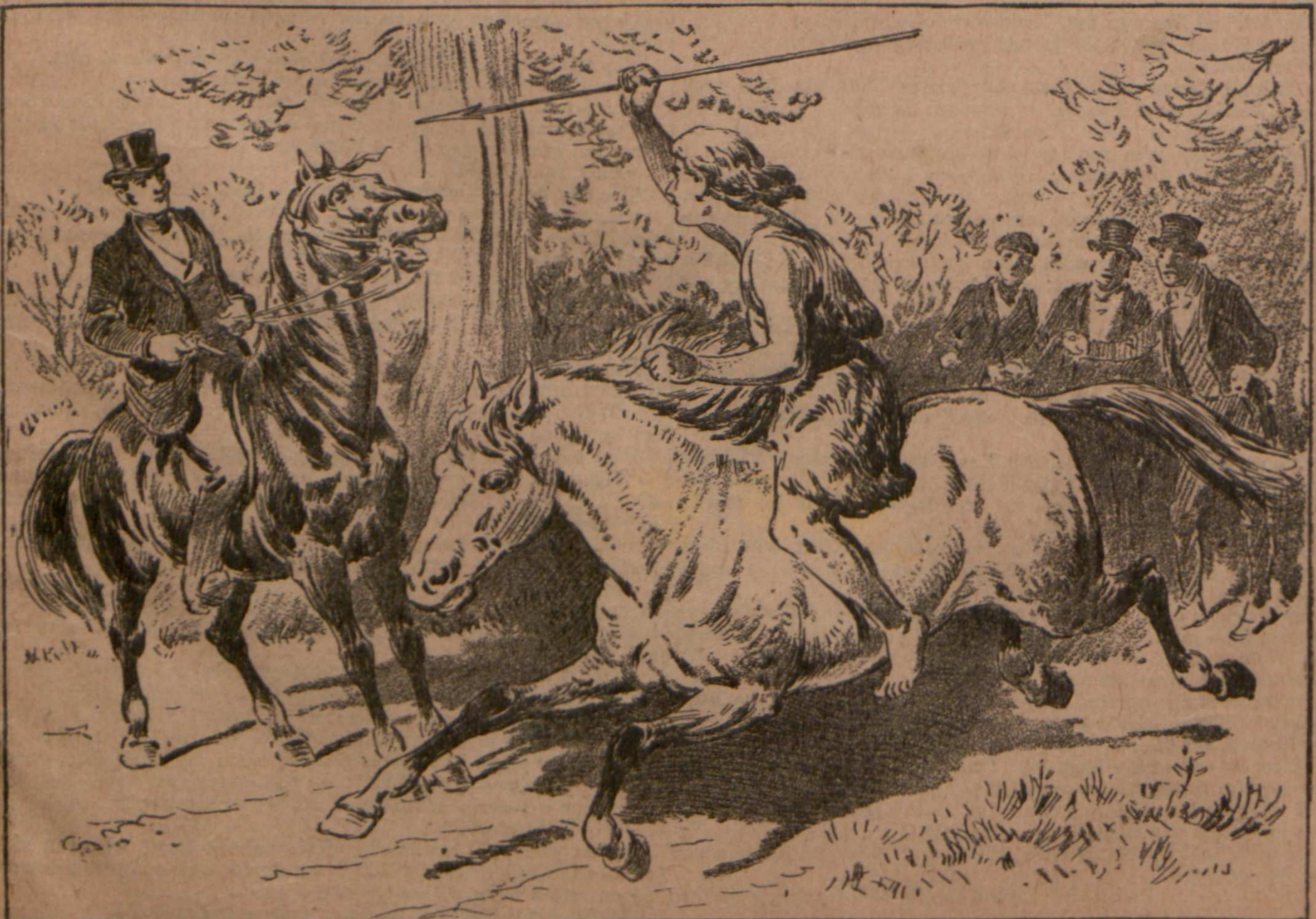
NEW YORK.

31 Rose St., N. Y. P. O. Box 2734.

5 Cents.

BOLD BERTIE, The Wild Boy of the Woods.

By EDWIN HARCOURT.



TURNING HIS HORSE AS IF TO RECEIVE THE CHARGE, THE BARONET PULLED A PISTOL FROM HIS HOLSTER, BUT BEFORE HE COULD AIM IT, THE WILD BOY CAST HIS SPEAR.

BOLD BERTIE, THE WILD BOY OF THE WOODS.

By EDWIN HARCOURT.

CHAPTER I.

OUR JOHN.

"I wonder what makes our John so late to-night," said Mr. David Broom, farmer, as he raked the embers of a wood fire together and put in some fresh logs.

"I hear somebody coming," said his wife, "and I dare say it's our John. Hear what the lad done afore you blow his head off."

It was indeed the expected John, who now entered the room, the door of which led straight into the yard, in a very excited fashion, not with form erect and leisurely tread, but head, arms, and legs acting together like one scared and terrified out of his senses.

"Feyther," he gasped, as that astonished follower of agricultural pursuits rose up to receive him, and then he fell against his father, and the pair rolled over together.

"The lad be drunk," roared David Broom.

"I bean't," bellowed our John, and he struggled to his feet; "but I be so turned upon with the ghosts and specters that I be stupefied."

"What new ghost have ye seen now?" asked David Broom, as with the assistance of his trembling wife he rose to his feet. "Speak, you long-jointed, unnatural lad, or I'll give ye a taste of the whip."

"I bean't goin' to be whipped any more," said our John, doggedly.

The determination of the rebellious son was unmistakable, and David Broom bent upon present peace, gave in.

"The lad's had a drop o' beer," he thought, "but I'll bring 'm round to-morrow."

"Well, set thee down, John," he said, "and tell us what ye've done with the mare."

"Let me tell of the ghost first, feyther," said John.

"Dang the ghost," returned his father, "tell me about the old mare."

"He fetched five pun ten," said our John, sullenly.

"How much?" asked the farmer, violently agitated.

"Five pun ten."

"Then all I've to say is that your brains have run into your leggins," said David Broom. "Now tell us about the ghost?"

"I'd just parted with Tom Cracks," began our John, "at the place where the road touches on Burnley Woods, when I heard a rustle in the bushes. The storm hadn't broke, and the moon was a-shining, so I, thinking it might be a rabbit or a hare, gets my stick ready to fetch him one on the head. The bushes rustle agin and then out there comes the ghost on a gray horse. He was like a naked boy with a bit of sheepskin hanging about him; he shrieks out summit, and stooping down takes my red handkercher off my stick, wheels round his horse and rides away shrieking into the woods. And your five pun ten wor in the handkercher."

What! roared the farmer. "Here, dang 'im dame, don't stand atwixt us; I must give 'im the whip."

"I'm twenty-two, and six feet one," muttered John, "and I ain't goin' to be licked."

"Do as you like an' go to ruin," said David Broom. "I leave you to go your own way, but I'll look arter my five pun ten, and to-morrow I'll go up and see the squire about it; maybe he'll be able to help me a bit."

On the following morning, as soon as breakfast was over, David Broom put on his best attire and set out to see the squire of the place, Sir Hugh Forrester.

Sir Hugh, a handsome man of about forty, listened with more interest than might have been expected to the farmer's story, and when it was done sat for a little while musing, with a very troubled look upon his face.

"I was not unprepared for some such story as this," he said, at last. This robber has been seen before, I am told.

"Indeed, Sir Hugh?"

"Yes; by one of my keepers. Only yesterday he declared that he saw him riding about one of the rugged spots you speak of; and riding without saddle or bridle, but leaping open chasms and bushes in the most reckless manner."

"I wish he'd broke his neck, Sir Hugh; it would have saved my five pun ten."

"A very natural wish, but attend to me, Mr. Broom; I wish to see your son at once."

"Shall I come with 'im?"

"Oh, no; there is no need to trouble you."

David Broom left the mansion of Sir Hugh Forrester, which bore the name of Burnley, in rather a bewildered state of mind.

"John!" he roared out, when he reached the farm-yard.

"Well," he said.

"The squire wishes to see ye; so put on your grandfeyther's black coat and my old beaver hat, and go up at once."

CHAPTER II.

THE WILD BOY.

David Broom accompanied his promising son to a point in his journey where a stile was fixed on the public road, for the accommodation of those who were led either by business or pleasure across the fields, and then with a few parting injunctions dismissed him.

David Broom sat down to await the return of his son, and for pastime took a look at the landscape, which was a very remarkable one, full of beauty and romance.

The farmer sat upon the stile lazily swinging his legs and gazing wearily on the river until the noise of a horse's feet upon the road aroused him.

Looking up he beheld a sight which lifted the little hair nature had left upon his head.

Just at the point where the road wound above the wood a youth riding upon a gray horse was approaching.

He was almost naked—over one shoulder and above his loins he had some loose garment made of skins, but that was all.

Farmer Broom sat upon the stile like one spell-bound, and he was sitting still when the horse dashed up, and in obedience to some signal from its rider pulled up upon its haunches.

Poor Broom was dazed, bewildered.

In a moment or so the boy looked at him, then sprang from his horse and advanced.

This was too much for the unhappy man, and a longing to flee came upon him, but the power to move his limbs was gone, and he only succeeded in rolling over upon his back and exhibiting the soles of his top-boots to the stranger.

The boy drew near, leaped the stile, and bent over him.

"Lord ha' mercy on me!" gasped David.

"Bertie!" shrieked the wild boy in his ear, and knelt down beside him.

"It is all over now," thought David Broom, and he closed his eyes expecting to have his respectable throat cut without delay.

The wild boy shortly arose and stood looking about him.

David Broom partially unclosed his eyes.

The boy turned to the quivering farmer, touched him upon the waistcoat with his spear, and pointed across the fields in the direction of the house of the Forresters.

"Eh?" said David.

The boy pointed again, stamped his foot, and frowned.

"He means me to run for it," groaned David Broom, as he slowly rose to his feet. "He is going to give me a chance for my life. Oh, dear!"

"Bertie!" shrieked the boy, imperiously.

"What does he mean by that?" thought the farmer, in agony. "Dash it—I can't run—I ain't done more than walk for twenty years."

But it was plain that the wild boy meant him to run, for he touched him again angrily, and imitated a running movement. David Broom cast one wild, despairing look about him, and then set out upon a rheumatic kind of trot.

Fear soon gave Mr. Broom strength, and girding up his loins, he dashed on at a very good pace, crossing the meadows in a time which, if it had been taken, would have been found the shortest on record.

Dashing over the second stile, he ran violently against somebody, and the pair rolled to the earth.

"Help! help!" roared the assailed one. "Run then—come out of it—remember that I carry knife and pistols, and can use them. Why, if it isn't old Broom! I say, Broom, at it early, are you?"

"Oh, is it you, Mr. Jeremy Tiddler?" returned David, sitting up. "I beg your pardon; I had no idea you were so near."

"I suppose not," replied the other, tartly, "seeing that I've only just come into your neighborhood on my quarterly visit. Look at my pack, it's covered with mud and half the goods ruined. I'll swear—but what are you staring at?"

"I wor wonderin' if that wild chap wor coming."

"The wild chap?"

"Yes; we've got a wild chap living about here, who can ride without saddle or bridle like seven devils, and can bring down a pheasant on wing with a bit of a stick."

Mr. Jeremy Tid . . . peddler and warehouseman as he was

pleased to call himself, was lean and long, and cunning in look, and all his length resented the story as an impossibility.

"Look you, Broom," he said, as he fixed his pack upon his back, "you keep that yarn for them that likes 'em, and take my advice and wait till night afore you begin to tiddle."

"So you don't believe me?"

"No, I don't—a wild chap—ha! ha!" laughed the peddler, and hurried away immensely tickled at the notion, and thoroughly satisfied in his being too clever to be taken in.

David Broom felt hurt and indignant, but he had no time to express his feelings in a soliloquy, for two persons drew near, one of whom proved to be his son, and the other a man of the rough class.

Both looked very downcast, and heaved a deep sigh as they drew near the former.

"Well," said he, "what did the squire say?"

"He didn't believe me," replied John, "and told I to drink less, and not get so fuddled at the fair."

"Now I wonder if he'll believe me?" asked David Broom, "for I've seen him, too, John. I'll go up to Sir Hugh. Come back with me, lads, and you see if he don't believe me."

There was no need to go quite to the house, for half way they met Sir Hugh riding at a walking pace, looking thoughtfully upon the ground.

He started as the trio pushed up before him, and frowned. The next moment his face was smooth again.

"What is it now?" he asked.

"If you please, Sir Hugh," replied David Broom, "I hears that you don't believe these lads here."

"No, I do not."

"But I have seen him, too, Sir Hugh."

"When?"

"To-day."

"How long ago?"

"Half an hour maybe."

"Now listen to me one and all," replied Sir Hugh. "I've told you that I don't believe your story, and I do not. Now I've expressed a hope that you will say nothing more about it, for I disbelieve such idle tales, and will not have them scattered about. You hear me? Can you keep your tongues quiet?"

"Yes, Sir Hugh," they replied, humbly.

"Beware of breaking your words," he said, and rode away.

"He'll come across that wild critter himself one day," said Sammy Bean; "but it won't do for us to chatter—"

"Anyhow," said John, "there is only mother and us knows it, and mother—oh, lor help—"

A whirr and a rush, and the gray horse, with its half-naked rider, came dashing by, the boy as he passed there, shrieking out:

"Bertie—Bertie!"

"What does he say?" asked Sammy Bean.

"Look at Sir Hugh!" cried out John; "will he believe us now?"

The baronet, who had ridden half way across the meadow, turned on hearing the almost unearthly cry, and beheld the furious horse with its strange burden approaching.

He drew his horse around swiftly, as if to receive the charge, and pulled a pistol from his holster, but before he could cock it the wild boy cast his spear, which pierced the fleshy part of Sir Hugh's right arm.

Then again the cry: "Bertie—Bertie!" rang out, and the gray horse, dashing on, bore its rider into the seclusion of the forest.

CHAPTER III.

JEREMY TIDDLER HAS HIS DOUBTS DISPELLED.

The trio, who had witnessed the strange scene, rushed forward and raised the baronet, who had fallen from his horse to the ground.

He was bleeding from his arm and his head, the latter having been cut by his fall.

"I am sorry I disbelieved you," said the baronet, "but I must insist upon your silence. This is some villain in masquerade, and he must be looked after."

"If I get nigh him when I've the gun I'll bring him down," said Sammy Bean, savagely.

"Do nothing until you get orders from me," said Sir Hugh, hastily; "and remember—silence all."

When he had left them the three put their heads together, and tried to make out why Sir Hugh should be so anxious to have the affair kept a secret, but could make nothing of it.

They found Jeremy Tiddler actively engaged with Mrs. Broom in discussing the prices and merits of certain bits of stuff, and when this was over, the peddler was invited to stay to dinner.

"And if ye like to stay the night, say," said the hospitable farmer; "it's a long way to the ne village."

That night the party around the fire was rather a noisy one, for the peddler, as unbelieving as a man could be, laughed at the notion of a wild boy, and much exasperated the three eye-witnesses of his existence.

"Putting aside all quarrels," he said, "I've just got this to say, that if I come across that wild boy, I'll bring him here, dead or alive. Mind what I say—dead or alive."

About eleven o'clock Sammy Beans left, running home at a great rate, and David Broom barred and locked the door.

"You will sleep on the ground floor, Tiddler, if you don't mind," said Broom. "Missus have got t'other room up for cleaning."

"Any room will do for me," replied the peddler, who was pot-valiant. "You need not put the shutters up—I'm afraid of nothing."

"All right," said David Broom. "If you don't mind, I don't. Good-night."

The room in which they left the peddler was a small one, adjoining the general sitting-room, with a window looking out upon the wide expanse of land between the farm and the forest.

The moon was shining brightly, and objects of any size could be plainly seen. Jeremy Tiddler, pot-valiant, looked through the window.

What is this?

A white or gray horse tearing about the land with a scantily clothed figure upon its back. The figure tossed and wielded above its head a huge club as if it were a straw.

The horse's head is turned toward the house, and the rider, tossing his arms, sways to and fro most recklessly.

Nearer and nearer.

At last the wild horse and its wild rider leaps the hedge which incloses the farm-yard, and the rider springs, or rather flits, from his seat.

"It can't be mortal!" gasps Jeremy Tiddler, and then there flies through his mind the remembrance of the scoffings he had been guilty of. He would give worlds now to recall them.

The boy, in his fantastic garb of skins, dances about like a spirit, leaps and laughs, and then suddenly springs up to the house and presses his face against the window.

One look at those bright, eager eyes is enough for Jeremy Tiddler, and with a groan, he sinks to the floor.

CHAPTER IV.

JEREMY IS QUITE CONVINCED.

The sun had been up an hour or more when the peddler returned to life. He was aroused by the entrance of our John, who laughed loud and long at the appearance the peddler presented as he sat upon the floor.

The peddler shuddered as he thought of the weird but handsome face which had been pressed against the window on the previous night, and although he felt bolder in the daylight, he yet felt a little nervous, and looked occasionally over his shoulder.

A good substantial breakfast was upon the table, but Jeremy Tiddler did but poor justice to it. The farmer rallied him upon his want of appetite.

The meal over, he strapped his pack upon his back, and set out briskly, fully determined to leave that spot behind him.

He continued on until he reached the spot where young John Broom had been robbed on the preceding night. Jeremy Tiddler had received a careful description of it, and he knew it at once.

"This is where the fellow rode out," he muttered, glancing apprehensively at the dark forest. "I wonder whether he is about."

He had drawn near to the line of oaks which bordered the road, and was standing under one of these fathers of the forest when he spoke. Barely had he uttered the words, when a fearful cry rang through the woods.

It was but one word, of no great meaning or portent in itself, but with a world of terror in its tone.

"Bertie!"

"Help—help!" shrieked Jeremy Tiddler, and he fell upon his knees.

Then from the branches above there leaped, with the action of a wild leopard, a form the peddler knew but too well. The story of his own friends and his experience of the previous night had made that half-clad form, that handsome wild face familiar to him.

Pouncing upon the wretched Jeremy Tiddler with irresistible force, the wild boy bore him to the earth and pinned him there.

Once more the wild, unmeaning cry pierced the peddler's ears.

"Bertie!"

"Take my pack and spare my life," moaned Jeremy.

His assailant with furious haste seemed to respond to the appeal, for with a quick, energetic movement, he tore off the pack from the trembling peddler's back, threw it carelessly over his shoulder, and with an exultant cry, fled into the woods.

Jeremy Tiddler paused a moment, and reflected.

"I can't go on," he thought, "for I've been robbed of every blessed thing, and I can't go back—because—because—well—I don't know why I shouldn't go back, except for the reason of having bragged a good deal and made a precious ass of myself. I must get up some yarn—just to save my credit."

Jeremy Tiddler turned toward Burnley, and concocted a story as he went.

CHAPTER V.

WHO AND WHAT IS THE WILD BOY.

An excited body of the inhabitants of Burnley were gathered round the door of the only public house the village could boast of. This was the Griffin, kept by one Charles Tubbs, of whom more anon.

"I tell ye," cried Jeremy Tiddler, who was telling his story, "that there ain't one wild boy, but at least a score. I don't want to tell lies and say there are fifty because I'm not certain of it, but I'll swear there were at least a score as fell upon me to-day."

No story ever loses by telling, and the narrative of Jeremy Tiddler gathered as it went, until it was currently reported, and to some extent believed, that a horde of wild men or boys, or both, had taken up their abode in the vast woods around.

One thing was certain.

There was at least *one* wild boy, for he made his existence indisputable.

Fully thirty people saw him within the week following the exciting adventures of Mr. Broom and the loss of the peddler's pack, and to all he appeared running or riding as mortal boy never rode or ran before.

One day Tubbs—full of sarcastic doubt—had his eyes opened, and believed in the wild boy ever after that.

He was standing by the door of his inn smoking a pipe, after dinner. It was high noon, and the sun was shining brightly.

Suddenly the clattering of a horse's feet was heard.

But the sound was not like the ordinary footfall of a horse, but had a muffled effect like that produced by horses galloping over tan or turf.

And yet there was the horse flying along the hard road of the village and approaching the inn.

On its back was a figure lately often described to him, but never believed in.

The wild boy!

Mr. Tubbs was a cool man, but this fearful sight was too much for him, and he quailed before it.

"They told me the truth," he gasped; there is a wild boy, and he rides an *unshod* horse—horse and rider both wild.

On came the boy with such a look upon his handsome face as Tubbs had never conceived possible in the face of a human being, and then he poised his club in the air, and shrieked:

"Bertie! Bertie!"

The sound bore no meaning to the ear of Mr. Tubbs, but the raised hand of the boy roused his instinct of self-preservation. He stooped quickly, and the heavy club whizzed up the passage, and striking his little bar-counter, flew in among a row of bottles, smashing half of them to atoms.

Then with a defiant shout the boy rode on—the horse leaped a hedge at a turning of the road, and both disappeared.

"Whew!" whistled Tubbs. "I've seen a few strange things in my time, but—"

"What on earth is the matter, Charley?" cried his wife, rushing out of the kitchen in the rear of the house; "are you drunk or mad?"

"Neither," replied Tubbs, calmly, "it's only the wild boy."

"The wild boy," repeated his wife, scornfully, "you've gone mad, too."

"No," said Tubbs, "but I'm partly shaken. Is Mike in?"

"He's feeding the pigs, at the back."

"Send him to me. I want him to take a letter to Sir Hugh."

Sitting down he wrote in a fair round hand, a few words, which he folded and carefully sealed.

By the time this was done, Mike, a red-headed boy, with the heaviest feet ever fixed upon a pair of youthful legs, stood before him.

"Mike," said Tubbs, "I want you go to the hall, and to give this to Sir Hugh, and nobody else, mind."

"I know, master," said Mike, nodding his head sagely.

In less than an hour a horse pulled up at the door of the inn, and Tubbs, hastening out, helped Sir Hugh Forrester to alight.

The baronet was much perplexed, and asked Tubbs if he was alone.

"Quite alone," answered Tubbs.

"Now, what is the meaning of this note?" asked the baronet, as soon as they were seated. "You say that you want to see me on important and pressing business."

"That's it, Sir Hugh. You've heard of this wild boy?"

"Yes; and more, Tubbs; I've seen him."

"Hum! and what do you think of him, Sir Hugh?"

"What do you mean?"

"Who is he?"

"How can I tell?" replied the baronet, biting his nails; "what has he to do with me?"

"Just look at this stick, Sir Hugh," said Tubbs, producing the weapon which had been hurled at him.

"What is this?"

"The stick that was thrown at me by this wild demon. But look at the top of it."

"What is this, a face—"

"Yes; don't you know it? The cutting's rude enough, but there is talent in it."

"Merciful Heaven!" cried Sir Hugh, springing to his feet; "it is Warren, the dumb man."

"Hush!" cried Tubbs, peering through the glass door into the bar. "There's somebody coming in. I'll soon get rid of him, and be back again."

"What is this?" muttered the baron, looking at the heavy club with ever increasing astonishment. "This is Warren's face, and there is pain in every line. Rough as the carving is, the death-gasp is plainly recorded here. What does it all mean?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE WILD BOY AT HOME.

We must now follow the wild boy, who, in leaving Griffin behind him, leaped a hedge, and galloping across the meadows at a furious pace, dashed into the woods.

For fully three miles he rode on, then swerving suddenly to the left, the wild boy put his steed at the trunks of two fallen trees, and the noble horse, gallantly leaping them, stood within a small glade, circular in form.

Dismounting, Bold Bertie waved his hand, and the horse, with a joyous snort, dashed away, probably to graze in some secret spot known to itself.

As soon as it was gone, the wild boy rolled back a piece of turf, almost two yards square, disclosing a wooden door, made of the roughest materials, put together in the rudest form.

This he raised, and placing it upon the ground, replaced the turf carefully upon it, and pulling the whole upon his head, descended a flight of steps, which the removal of the trap-door had revealed.

Measuring the position to a nicety, he dropped the door again into its place, and thus effectually concealing his retreat, descended, with the step of familiarity, about sixty stairs, cut in the firm clay, and turning around at the bottom, entered a cave, dimly lighted by a smoldering fire.

Bold Bertie's first care was to rake the ashes together, and put on more wood from a supply in the corner, the smoke from the additional fuel rising to the roof, where it spread about and crept through the crevices made by the roots of the trees, and thus escaping imperceptibly by the upper air.

In one corner of the cavern a small spring trickled down, and lost itself again in the earth. From this Bold Bertie filled his earthen pot, and put it upon the fire. Into this he cast a pheasant which had previously been plucked, and sat down to watch its cooking.

The water boiled, and the pheasant yielded a grateful odor. It soon disappeared under the strong mastication of the boy, who, having eaten his fill, lay down to sleep.

Lying in repose, he was wondrously handsome; the mold of his face and figure was perfection, and sculptors would have found in him their beau ideal of Apollo.

He slept long and soundly, and on awaking replenished his fire, and having drawn a spear, left the cave.

When he reached the open air twilight had fallen, and the dim light of eve gave an air of solemnity to the deep shades of the forest.

Replacing the door, and covering it with the turf, Bertie gave one cry—shrill and piercing as a steam whistle.

A moment's stillness followed, and then there came thundering through the wood the gallant horse which had borne him early in the day.

Leaping upon his back Bold Bertie twirled his spear above his head, and like some restless spirit of the night was borne away.

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTAIN GRIT AND HOWARD FORRESTER.

A coach and four is a pretty sight, particularly when the nags are up to their work, and the coach in good condition, and the Swallow plying from Tenby to several towns in a northerly direction was such a one.

Now it so happened that on a certain day the Swallow was, for a wonder, scantily supplied with passengers, and upon its roof only two were seated.

Both were undoubtedly salts, but there was a wide difference between them.

One was young and the other was old; one wore the uniform of a midshipman in his majesty's service, the other the rough pea-jacket and glazed hat of a captain of a merchantman.

"So, youngster," said the latter, "you are going home on furlough?"

"Yes," replied the boy. "I am going for three months. It's quite a favor, you know, but my father is a gentleman of influence."

"Is he?" said the old salt.

"Yes," continued the boy. "Sir Hugh Forrester—perhaps you have heard of him."

"Yes, I have," replied the captain, after an instant's hesitation, "and so you are his son—"

"Yes, I am Howard Forrester."

"That's a big name—different to mine."

"What is your name?"

"Grit—David Grit."

"There's not much in Grit," said Howard Forrester, frankly; "but David's good. David is a very big name—and you have come down here to see your friends?"

"No, I ain't got no friends hereabouts."

"But you know where you are going?"

"Not exactly. I'm goin' to take what turns up," said David Grit, rubbing the palms of his hands together.

"Why not come to Burnley?" said Howard Forrester.

"Where's that?"

"My house."

"But where am I to put up, lad?"

"At the Griffin—it's a good inn and plenty of room—do come, for I've taken a liking to you."

"Have you indeed, lad," said the old captain, brightening, "then I'll come."

The coach pulled up a lane where a handsome carriage was in waiting.

A lady was seated inside with a face which still wore traces of great beauty, but she looked pale and care-worn. The young middy leaped down and ran to her.

She folded him in her arms, exclaiming, "Howard, my darling boy," and Captain Grit, who had been left behind by the coach with Howard's kit and his own, stood by with his hat off.

"I am so glad to see you, mother dear," said Howard, "oh, how kind of you to come."

"There's danger in the road," Lady Forrester replied, "and I could not rest—so I came."

"What danger, mother?"

"Some fearful boy or man is driving everybody mad with fear; both Sir Hugh and myself beheld him last night. We had just dined and were standing at the window, looking out upon the park, where the light of the full moon shone gloriously, when from the wood there dashed a white horse with a fearful figure on its back."

"How strange!"

"It is, indeed, my dear Howard and Sir Hugh was much alarmed and overcome; but who is this gentleman bowing here?"

"Oh, it's Mr. Grit, in the merchant service, who is going to Burnley; I offered to give him a lift—but I did not expect to find you here."

"What does it matter, my dear Howard? Introduce me and let us go on."

Howard beckoned David Grit forward, who, blushing like a schoolboy, bowed low to the graceful lady, who smiled upon him in such a way as to put him at his ease.

"I am glad to see you, Captain Grit," she said, "and shall be pleased to have your society as far as Burnley."

David Grit having put the portmanteau into the rumble, took his seat beside Lady Forrester, and Howard sat facing them.

The carriage started, and the dozen miles were quickly covered by the mettlesome horses, and pleasant conversation whiled away the time with the inmates. At length they drew near Burnley wood.

The coachman, who had grown a little paler as they entered the first avenue of trees, looked rapidly from right to left, and Lady Forrester likewise looked a little apprehensive.

They had arrived within sight of the park gates, when the

coachman, with a cry of terror, reined up his horses, and Lady Forrester drew her boy closer to her.

"What is it, mother?" cried Howard. "I am not afraid of it. Remember that I've faced the cannon balls of the French. Let me go."

"That's a bit of British oak," said David Grit, looking at him admiringly.

Just then the clatter of hoofs was heard, and the figure of the wild boy, with his mettlesome steed, dashed by. He looked into the carriage with fire flashing from his eyes, but he uttered no sound, and like a shadow, was gone.

"Thank Heaven," said Lady Forrester, "he did not attack us."

"He is but a boy," said Howard, "but what a handsome fellow."

"Quite so," said David Grit, "and now, my lady, as we have reached the gates, I'll take my leave."

"Indeed you will not," returned Lady Forrester, "not until you have dined. Nay, I will take no refusal—Banks, drive in."

Banks, the coachman, touched his hat and drove in, and David Grit, with a sense upon him that he was getting into high society, leaned back in the carriage and resigned himself to his fate.

CHAPTER VIII.

A VISIT FROM BERTIE.

"Well, Neighbor Broom, how be ye?"

Neighbor Broom looked at neighbor Cracks and sorrowfully shook his head.

What further conversation might have passed between the two friends was interrupted by a servant in the livery of the Forresters who dashed up on horseback, with a frightened look upon his face.

"Hallo! hallo!" he cried.

"What be the matter?" asked old Cracks.

"You belong to the yeomanry?" said the man, hurriedly.

"Ay, I do."

"Both of you?"

"Yes."

"Then arm at once, and meet in front of the hall."

"What be the matter?" asked old Broom.

"Murder is the matter," replied the servant. "Sir Hugh Forrester has been stricken down by that wild devil who is hiding in the woods."

"Stabbed?"

"No. Sir Hugh met him, and fired at him—so my lady, who was with him, says—and the wild boy drew out a sling, and sent a stone straight between the eyes of Sir Hugh."

"Is he dead?"

"No; but he hasn't spoken or moved since. Arm yourselves at once. My lady wishes you to do so. I must ride on."

He put spurs to his horse, leaped the nearest hedge, and galloped away over the fields.

"I knew troublous times were coming," said old Cracks. "Hurry home, Neighbor Broom, and I'll call for ye as soon as I can get into my regimental breeches."

Old Broom hastened home.

Mrs. Broom was considerably astonished to behold him; but, checking her outburst of curiosity, he pushed her back into the kitchen, and burst out with the more exciting news:

"Sir Hugh's murdered," he said, "and the yeomanry are called out."

Barely had he uttered the words, when a piercing shriek escaped from his wife, and following the direction of her outstretched arm, he turned, and beheld a sight which he afterward declared "froze the marrer in his veins."

There was the wild boy coming through the open window, with his gleaming eyes fixed upon the farmer and his wife.

While old Broom and his wife stood like two beings suddenly petrified, the boy walked about the room, examining it curiously.

The boy laughed, and came up close to Broom. Then laying a hand softly upon his chest, he uttered, in a soft, musical voice, the word with which our readers are familiar:

"Bertie!"

But it was plain that the wild boy did not mean to stay, for, as a horse, bearing Roger Cracks, dashed up to the door, he leaped upon the window-sill, and stood there listening until the voice of Cracks was heard:

"Mr. Broom, are you ready?"

Then bold Bertie jumped down, and ran away toward the wood.

"You ought to have been ready," said Roger Cracks, as he came into the kitchen; "my lads won't like our being late."

"I can't help it. I've had a visitor. Cracks."

"Who?"

"The wild boy."

"Darn you for a——"

"Look out of the window, if you don't believe it," said old Broom, and Roger Cracks, doing as he was bidden, beheld Bertie running like a hare toward the wood.

"Why didn't you stop 'im?" he said.

"Did you ever see 'im?" said old Broom, answering one question by another.

"Yes; I see 'im run."

"But I mean close—under your ugly nose?"

"No, I didn't."

"Then wait until you do," said old Broom, "afore you ax me again why I didn't lay hands on him. Now I'm ready if you are."

Mounted upon two steeds of the cart-horse breed, they rode to Burnley Hall, where upon the lawn they found a considerable number of the yeomen already assembled.

At their head was young Howard Forrester, astride a fine milk-white Arab beast, on which his mother often rode, but which he had chosen for their service.

"Gentlemen," said the boy, with the air of an old warrior, "will you kindly fall in?"

The gentlemen fell in, in rather a wavy line.

Captain David Grit now came hurrying through the park, mopping his head with an enormous red silk handkerchief as he came.

"Hallo! Captain Grit, how are you?"

"Morning, my young friend; what's the news?"

"Going to hunt the fellow who attacked Sir Hugh; and here comes your horse."

"My horse?" said David Grit, rubbing his head; "what am I to do with him?"

"Ride him."

"I never did such a thing in all the days of my life."

"Oh, it's very easy," said Howard. "Take the reins in your hand—a little shorter, please—now put your left foot in the stirrup, and get into the saddle. That's it. Keep steady or you'll be over the other side."

"I've come to anchor," grunted Captain Grit, "but the bottom's bad, and half a gale will run me ashore."

"Now, gentlemen, proceed," said Howard. "Captain Grit, you come with us."

"I will, if this 'ere creetur will let me," muttered the captain.

"I never was aboard of a craft like this afore. He's got an ugly look about his figure-head—however, here goes. I'll crowd on all sail, and keep up with the envoy."

Digging his heels into the horse's ribs, he trotted after the yeomen, who were now considerably ahead, half-way across the park.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE WOOD.

Young Howard looked like the model of a commander, and his very air overawed the big, burly bucolies who were under his command. When he told them to divide themselves into pairs they did so, and each pair struck into the wood as boldly as men could be expected to do under the circumstances.

Howard Forrester and Captain Grit were riding through the wood side by side, when suddenly Leo, Captain Grit's horse, became unmanageable, and galloped off into the woods at a furious pace.

Howard put spurs to his horse and followed, but the furious steed which bore the old captain outpaced him at every stride, and soon disappeared.

Howard shouted, and his cries died out in the woods without a response.

He looked around on every side, but only the stately trunks of the trees and the wild undergrowth met his view, and silence reigned around.

At last this silence was broken, and the deep thud of a horse's hoofs fell upon his ears; nearer came the sound until he could distinguish the crash of bushes, mingled with the beating of the hoofs.

Like an arrow from a bow Bold Bertie dashed by, with his eyes fixed on Howard, at whom he aimed a club, but did not throw it. Then, around through the wood, over the trunks of trees went horse and boy.

For a moment Howard Forrester was dazed by the rapid flight of the wild figure.

But only for a moment.

With a shout that made the wood ring again, he struck the spurs deep into the flanks of his horse, and shouted after him:

"Whoever you are, turn and face me; be you coward or fool, man, boy, or devil, halt! and meet me hand to hand."

Bold Bertie turned upon the bare back of his steed and uttered

a shriek of defiance of such terrible power that the blood flew from Howard's cheeks, and it seemed as if the pulses of his heart stood still; but he rode on determinedly, and soon the brushwood and the moss-covered trunks of the trees hid both pursued and pursuer from view.

CHAPTER X.

A MYSTERY.

In a chamber at the great court-house lay Sir Hugh Forrester, sleeping. By his side sat Lady Forrester, watching for a return to consciousness.

Presently he opened his eyes, and looked dreamily about the chamber, until his gaze fell upon her.

"Where is Howard?" he asked.

"In the wood with the yeomen."

"What are they doing there?"

"Looking for that terrible creature——"

Before she could say more, Sir Hugh leaped from the bed and began hastily to pull on his garments.

"Hugh—Hugh, what are you doing?"

"I am going to call back the yeomanry. Who was mad enough to call them out?"

"I did."

"You! Just like your folly and meddling; why cannot you keep to your embroidery, instead of interfering with matters for men."

"But, Hugh, the creature had tried to murder you."

"That was my affair. Oh! stand away! I must go at once and call back these meddlers. Howard, too, must be summoned home."

"Let the servants go, Hugh."

"No, I must go, and go alone. Woe to any if they have laid a finger upon him."

"They would not touch Howard."

"I am not speaking of him."

"Who then?"

"The—the wild boy."

"And why should you defend him, Hugh?" asked his wife.

"What matters that to you?"

"There is some mystery," she cried, barring the way; "who and what is this awful creature who has taken to haunting this spot. Tell me, I implore you."

"I do not know; I only guess," replied Sir Hugh; "but it matters naught to you; stand out of the way."

"You are not fit to go."

"I am strong," he cried, tossing off some brandy; "let me pass."

She still sought to detain him, but with an oath he seized her arm, and thrusting her aside, ran out.

On the satircase he met the doctor, who stood aghast at the sight of his patient. The baronet hurried down, and had mounted a horse and ridden away before his medical attendant had recovered sufficiently to ask what was the meaning of the rapid recovery of Sir Hugh.

The baronet was mounted upon a powerful roan, a favorite hunter of his, which had fortunately been resting for a day or so, and was therefore in a condition for work, and stretching out its limbs, it flew across the park at a pace which satisfied the impatient man upon its back.

"If," he muttered—"if it should be so—and yet how should it be? Why do I allow each idle fancy to rouse half-slumbering terror and wake up the awful memory of the past? It cannot be—and yet—the cry—the voice—and, oh!—the look—or is it some demon who mockingly assumes the form to drive me mad?"

He paused, and took a despairing look at the landscape, and then resumed:

"I have heard of men tortured thus; some by a real specter, others by the wild distortion of a disordered brain; but mine is no dream, mine is no fancy. Others have seen it, and heard the cry, others have quailed before those gleaming eyes, and seen the noble face as the horse sweeps by. So I must be up and doing; I must to the wood, to call back Howard, and that meddling old fool, Grit. Hark! what cry is that?"

It was only the note of the wood-pigeon, but it startled him. Sickness had weakened him, and he trembled, and, suddenly putting himself together, he pressed the impatient roan with his knees and darted into the wood.

In the meantime, Captain Grit was performing feats of horsemanship that would have insured him a very long engagement in a traveling circus.

The mare soon became pretty well blown, and stood still, letting off steam, while Captain Grit, glad of anything in the shape of a respite, lay upon her neck, thoroughly used up.

Suddenly, without warning, a horse rushed past, with frenzied

eye, and snorting, and kicking its heels in the air, galloped out of sight.

Leo rose straight up on her hind legs, and Captain Grit slid over the crupper, but ere he could fall entirely off she righted herself, and stood still, trembling.

"What is it, my poor Leo?" cried the captain; "a horse without a rider! I wonder if anything has happened to young Howard? If there has, I should break my heart. Go for'ard, you brute with the rolling eye!"

The "brute with the rolling eye" started off amicably upon the back-track of the horse which had just passed, and ambling along pleasantly, enabled the captain to retain his seat, and keep his eyes about him.

In this fashion they jogged along for some distance, Captain Grit occasionally shouting, but receiving no response. He was engaged in one of these vocal efforts, when Leo suddenly shied, and threw him from the saddle.

The captain fell heavily, but the next moment he was up and kneeling beside a figure lying prostrate upon the ground.

It was Sir Hugh Forrester, with the top of his skull beaten in, cold and dead.

CHAPTER XI.

HOWARD'S CHASE.

On through the dense wood rode Bertie, the wild boy, and Howard Forrester, his pursuer.

Both had uncommon pluck and daring, and were strong beyond their years, but the wild boy had some experience of such work, and he was distancing Howard rapidly, when his horse, coming to a pile of timber higher than it had yet met with, caught its fore feet against the top and fell.

It plunged over on its back, throwing Bold Bertie fully a dozen feet ahead, and rolling him over and over.

Howard, who had ridden up to the obstacle, and seen how impossible it was for him to leap his horse over it, reined up, and rapidly tethering the reins to a branch of the tree, climbed over and ran toward Bold Bertie, who lay apparently dead.

But ere he could reach him, the wild boy started up, and with a defiant shout, fled away on foot. There was a mockery, too, in his cry, which seemed to say:

"I fly from you for fun—not that I fear you. Catch me if you can."

Just then they reached an open glade, and the wild boy turned and faced young Howard.

Bold Bertie was as calm as if he had just stepped out of his cave, but young Howard was completely blown.

It was some time ere the latter could recover breath to speak, and his first words were:

"Who are you?"

"Bertie," replied the wild boy.

"Where do you live?"

"Bertie," he said, again.

"Why do you wander about like a savage?"

"Bertie," was the answer given for the third time.

"What mockery is this?" cried Howard; "answer me like a sensible creature."

"Bertie!" cried the wild boy, for the fourth time, and Howard Forrester, angry at what he looked upon as a mockery, drew a pistol from his breast, and pointing it at the wild boy, said:

"If you don't tell me who and what you are, I will fire upon you."

The eyes of the wild boy flushed forth an angry gleam, and he raised his club to strike.

Howard fired.

Bold Bertie winced as if he had been struck, but he did not fall, and the next instant the club whizzed through the air, and struck young Forrester upon the temple. His brain swam round, and he fell.

Tossing his arms aloft, Bold Bertie sprang forward, and threw himself upon the prostrate boy.

CHAPTER XII.

"A WIDOW AND CHILDLESS!"

Lady Forrester and the doctor watched the form of Sir Hugh as he galloped across the park, and disappeared into the wood.

They sat there silent, until a servant entered the room nearly an hour later.

"What is it, Thomas?"

"Leo the mare has come home, my lady."

"Alone?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Who was riding it?"

"Either Master Howard or the captain; the groom doesn't know which, my lady."

"Bid him get ready, and send my maid to me."

"Yes, my lady."

"What are you going to do?" asked the doctor, when the man was gone.

"I am going to ride out in search of my son."

"Stop," said the doctor, "here comes one who is a messenger, if I mistake not."

It was Captain Grit, hatless and breathless, making all haste to the house. The doctor went out to meet him, and it was some time ere they reappeared together.

Lady Forrester looked at them. Both were pale and quiet—too quiet not to be the bearer of evil tidings.

"My boy!" she said.

"Is safe and well, so [far as we know," replied the doctor.

"Compose yourself, Lady Forrester."

"But you have evil news for me—speak."

No answer.

"Is my husband hurt?"

"He is."

"Much hurt? But I see—tell me no more. I fear the worst." And bowing her head, she wept passionately.

The two men walked out quietly, leaving her to vent her grief.

"Better to give her a little time," said the doctor; "you are sure he is dead."

"He is awful to look upon," said Captain Grit, with a shudder; "let none who love him see that distorted face."

"I will give orders to prepare a room," said the doctor; "you take half a dozen men with some linen, and bring him here in a bundle."

And thus he was brought in about the hour of twilight and laid upon his couch of death. The doctor bound up the wounded head and washed the face.

Then he went to Lady Forrester and told her that she might look upon him. She went in and remained by the side of the dead for an hour, praying.

Then she came out, and meeting the old captain in the lobby, asked him if her son Howard had returned.

The old salt said: "No, but he will not be long, Lady Forrester."

"How can you tell? Do you know where he is?"

Captain Grit shook his head.

"A widow and childless! Whither shall I turn for help!" cried Lady Forrester.

"Put your trust in God," returned the old captain, "and He will not fail you. Your son is not the sort of lad to come to harm."

"But where is he?"

"That, Lady Forrester, I will soon find out. If he is alive and above ground I will find him."

"You are a good, kind friend," said Lady Forrester. "How can I ever repay you?" and then she gave him her hand, and he kissed it reverently.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE CAVE.

In the cave of the wild boy we find Howard Forrester, lying on a couch of fern, and by his side sits Bold Bertie carefully tending him, fearing to either move or speak too loudly lest he should awaken him.

With wondrous lightness and care he attends to the fire, gathering the ashes together and putting in fresh wood without making the slightest sound; but as he resumes his seat Howard Forrester wakes up.

"Hallo, Bertie!" he said.

"Bet-ter?" returns the other, with a delighted look.

"Getting on famously," replied Howard, "and as hungry as ten people—"

"Hungry—eat," said Bold Bertie.

"You begin to talk like a book," said Howard, laughing, "when a fellow is hungry, the next thing is to eat—that is if there is any grub handy. What have you got?"

"Bird—pretty feather-bird."

"Pheasant—good!" said Howard, smacking his lips, "bring it out."

Bertie brought Howard the earthen pipkin which had been simmering close to the fire and put it before his guest. Howard ate heartily, Bold Bertie looking on with delight.

"You cook like a professional," said Howard, when he had eaten his fill, "who taught you?"

Bold Bertie shook his head—he did not know.

"Well—it doesn't matter," said Howard, lying down again, "and by the way, my head is getting hot again, give me a few fresh leaves, old fellow."

Bertie fetched some from near the spring where a heap was lying, and first dipping them into the cool water laid them upon the wound.

"You fetched me a nasty crack," said Howard smiling.

"Forgive!" said Bertie, imploringly.

"Forgive you! what have I to forgive?" returned Howard, "did I not try to shoot you, like the big blackguard I was. How is your wound?"

"Well," said Bertie, pointing to his breast.

"It was a plucky thing for you to cut out the bullet," said Howard, "and to do it without wincing."

Bold Bertie laughed gleefully—praise from his newly found friend was sweet to him.

"No care for pain," he said, proudly, "laugh with him."

"Laugh at it, Bertie," said Howard.

"Laugh at it," repeated Bertie.

"That's it," said Howard. "You catch up a thing like smoke, and now for your lesson in English."

The lesson consisted of an exchange of words, Howard giving the pronunciation and explaining the meaning, and Bertie taking up and absorbing all with marvelous accuracy.

He was so sharp-witted that Howard often paused to compliment him and when he did so the face of the other was a glow—his admiration for Howard was unlimited and his devotion boundless.

It was a long lesson and neither grew weary of it until the fire had burned low; then Bertie rose and signified that it was time for both to sleep.

CHAPTER XIV.

CAPTAIN GRIT BECOMES A LETTER-CARRIER.

The mystery of Howard Forrester's disappearance remained for weeks unrevealed, and Captain Grit was worn to a shadow by his incessant searchings after the missing boy.

He was often overcome by fatigue, and frequently slept under the shadow of some tree when the sun was high; and upon one of these occasions an adventure befell him.

He dreamed that he was wandering in the depths of a dark wood, worn out by fatigue, and at last, much against his will, he lay down to sleep.

While lying there, a fairy came and tweaked his nose, and the notion of a fairy doing anything of that sort was so ridiculous that he laughed, and laughing awoke him.

His nose was still smarting, and satisfied that somebody must really have touched his nasal organ, he sprang up, and as he did so, a packet fell from his breast.

It was in rough pieces of gray linen, torn apparently from the inside of a waistcoat, or coat, and on the outside was inscribed, in charcoal:

"Lady Forrester."

"It's a rum-looking letter," said the old sailor; "but I will gladly be the postman."

He bore the missive to Lady Forrester, who opened it with trembling hands.

"It is from Howard," she said. "Thank Heaven I am not childless!"

The words were few, but reassuring. They ran thus:

"I am safe and well, dear mother, and with a friend. I shall return one day. Love to father and yourself. HOWARD."

"He did not know of his father's death," she murmured; "poor boy! But who is this friend?"

Captain Grit had not a notion; neither had Doctor Banks; and the former returned to the Griffin with quite a little aching of the heart remaining, for he wondered who this friend could be to whom Howard had so suddenly become attached!

CHAPTER XV.

EARLY REMEMBRANCES.

A month later, and once more we stand in the cave with Howard Forrester and Bold Bertie, and now we find the change greater than before.

The great change is in Bertie himself, who has lost all that wild look which formerly distinguished him, and naught but the fire of a courageous spirit remained.

"What do you remember as the earliest incident of your life, Bertie?" asked Howard.

"I have a remembrance of a lovely face," replied Bertie, "and what you call a room, and some curtains; then I call to mind a ride in a cart with a tall, handsome man, and somebody sprang up behind, and the tall, handsome man fell out, and lay quietly on the ground, and—and—I think there was blood. The next thing I can think of is this cave, where I was walking about, and playing with some pieces of rag and stick a man was sit-

ting in the corner—the same whose face I have cut upon these clubs here."

"What a strange fancy!"

"It first came upon me about two years ago—I suppose it was two years, but am not certain—I was always cutting about with a knife, and trying to shape something. I shaped his face."

"Was he dead then?"

"Oh, he had died long before, when I was quite a little fellow. But I knew nothing about death, and used to wonder why he did not wake up. It was only when he began to decay——"

"How awful!"

"Only then that I knew what was the matter, and I scraped away a hole just under the spring, and buried him there."

Howard looked in that direction, almost expecting to see the ghost of the dead rise.

"Who taught you to ride?"

"I taught myself that. I found a young colt straying in the woods one day, and I got upon its back, and he threw me. This put my blood up, and I being as active as you see, got on again, and stuck to him like a leech. We had a hard struggle, but I was master; and from that time we became friends. He never strays far away, and comes at the sound of my voice."

"But your companion—did he never ride?"

"No."

"Nor speak?"

"No."

"He must have been dumb."

"I am sure he was," said Bertie, "and deaf, too, for he never heard anything; but he could see—ah, he could see!"

"Have you any idea who he was?"

"No."

"Did he leave nothing—no writing?"

"What is writing?"

"Like what I sent to Lady Forrester some weeks ago."

"Oh, no; he could not do that. He did nothing but snare things and eat them."

"How was it you did not run away?"

"I never dreamt of it. This was my home, like that great place you call yours is to you, and when I made signs to him that I should like to go farther away, he used to make signs to me that I must not do it, and I obeyed him."

"Had you ever seen any men or women?"

"Not until about a year ago."

"But now, one question more. Why did you always shout 'Bertie?'"

"It is a word which has rung in my ears for a long time; sleeping or waking it never left me, and I have often traced it back to the time when I was riding with the handsome man in the cart, and I think he must have uttered it."

"You are the greatest puzzle I ever met with," said Howard; "but you are very persevering, and will turn out as good a man as any of us. Now, I am going to tell you one thing—I am quite well now."

"Yes, yes," cried Bertie.

"And I must tell you another. I am going away from here."

"Going away! Oh, Howard, I could never live here alone again."

"No more you shall, for you shall go with me."

"Go with you, Howard! Oh, how happy I am!"

"Yes, you shall, old fellow, and live with me at Burnley Hall, and I will show everybody what a handsome fellow the wild boy is."

"But am I really handsome, Howard?"

"You are the handsomest fellow I ever saw."

"I am glad of that," said Bertie, simply; "for people will like me."

"My mother will love you," said Howard; "and to-morrow we will go and see her."

CHAPTER XVI.

A FEARFUL BLOW.

Bold Bertie slept but little that night, for the dawn of a new life kept his brain in a whirl.

Howard slept lightly, for he had less cause for excitement, and when Bertie, after a peep aloft, told him the sun was rising, he rose up like one about to pursue the ordinary avocations of the day, and asked for something to eat.

"We have a long way to go," he said, "and it won't do to travel upon an empty stomach."

Bertie set out his rough food, and Howard attacked it with a youthful appetite.

"We must be cautious about the way we travel," he said, "for you have got your name up in the country, I can tell you."

The two strangely assorted boys left the cave, and outside covered the entrance completely with the turf.

They had a long walk before them, but such youth and spirits as they possessed make light of distance, and mile after mile was covered without their giving out any sign of fatigue. At length they were within the precincts of Burnley, and Howard paused.

"Now, Bertie," he said, "I am going to leave you for a while, and I want to leave you safe. Where will you hide?"

"I not afraid," returned Bertie, proudly.

"I know you are not," said Howard; "but I don't want you to get into a row with a lot of yokel fellows and spoil the whole thing; you must hide."

"There, then," said Bertie, pointing into the branches of a huge oak tree.

"So be it," returned Howard. "Now, good-by, and remember that you do not move until you hear me cry."

"I understand," said Bertie, and mounted into the tree with the activity of a squirrel.

Easier in his mind, Howard Forrester walked toward his home, still using great precaution, as he wanted to surprise his parents, both of whom he believed to be alive. Twice he heard voices in the wood, but by making a detour he managed to escape the speakers, and eventually reaching the hall, he sought one of the private doors at the back, and found it open.

This gave him ready access to the wing where his own apartment was, and without being interrupted he gained the room. There it was, just as he had left it, with the sole addition of that indefinable air of desolation which hangs about every unoccupied room however richly or sumptuously furnished.

Returning the same way, he locked the outer door and put the key into his pocket, so as to insure an entrance when he returned with Bertie. Then he sought out his wild friend, and brought him from the tree with the pre-arranged signal.

"All clear!" shouted Howard. "You may come."

The same good fortune which had waited upon Howard, attended upon the pair, and they reached the private room of Howard without meeting with a living being.

There so much presented itself to Bertie for wonderment that he would have spent all that day turning over this and that, but for Howard, who produced some clothes from a press, and insisted upon his putting them on.

This was not done without Howard performing the part of valet, and when Bertie was duly arrayed, he presented the appearance of a very handsome young English gentleman.

"See, now I leave you," said Howard. "In a moment you will hear a click, and then you will not be able to open the door."

He closed it, and left Bertie to test the truth of this statement. Stealing softly down stairs, he passed down the main corridor, and opened the drawing-room door. Peeping in, he beheld Lady Forrester, dressed in deep mourning, seated upon a couch.

Her somber attire startled him, and forgetting for a moment the real object of his visit, he rushed in, exclaiming:

"Mother! what means this dress?"

She sprang up with a glad cry, and folding him in her arms, sobbed aloud:

"My boy, thank Heaven, my darling son!"

"Yes; I have come back," said Howard. "But tell me, why are you in mourning?"

"Has nobody told you?" she asked, holding him a little way from her.

"I have seen nobody," he replied. "I came in by stealth to surprise you."

"Oh, Howard! Prepare your mind for a shock—your father—"

"He!" cried Howard, recoiling. "No, no."

"Oh, yes, Howard, he is no more."

The poor boy reeled, and sank upon a couch, but mastering his emotion he returned to his mother's side, and putting his arms affectionately around her, said:

"Tell all, mother, I can bear it. How did he die?"

"In great pain, Howard, for he was wounded sorely."

"Wounded, mother? Then he died foully?"

"As foully as ever died a murdered man. I cannot—though I would forgive the brutal ignoramus who laid him low. His head was beaten in by a club."

"But who did it?"

"The miscreant who has caused so much commotion here of late," replied Lady Forrester. "The Wild Boy of the Woods."

CHAPTER XVII.

HOWARD'S TEST.

The terrible words which fell from Lady Forrester's lips smote Howard with the force of a thunderbolt. It was a won-

der the boy did not die under the contending emotions which now beset him.

His father dead!

Bold Bertie his murderer, and here by his invitation, within the house, waiting under lock and key for Howard's return.

Guilty or not he could not give up Bertie then, for all his promises and friendship would appear to have been hypocrisy, and nothing better than a snare to entrap one who had defied every open means. The tongue that might have said: "He is here, mother," clove to his mouth, and for a time he could utter no word.

"You have not told me where you have been hiding, Howard," said Lady Forrester. "I have something to learn from you."

"You shall know it shortly, my lady mother," he replied; "for the present let me retire to my room and rest awhile. Grief and fatigue well-nigh weigh me down."

"Go, my son," she said, and, kissing him on the forehead, dismissed him.

With slow and hesitating step, Howard ascended the stairs, revolving in his mind what to do. One thing he must decide upon at once, and that was, to accept either Bertie's guilt or innocence; but how to make sure—how to clear away all this cloud of doubt, and bring forth his friend free from every stain?

"I will talk to him," muttered Howard, as he unlocked the door, "and his face shall be a witness to one thing or the other."

As he entered the room Bertie turned from the window, where he had been looking out upon the landscape, and rushed toward him with a cry of pleasure.

"Stand back a moment," cried Howard, "for ere our hands touch again I have something to say to you."

"How—how changed you are," uttered Bertie. "This is not Howard, but another."

"It is I, Howard Forrester, and I fear you know what has wrought this change in me. Bertie, my father is dead."

"Dead?" repeated Bertie, wonderingly; "live no more?"

"Yes," said Howard; "he has been foully and brutally murdered!"

"Murdered?" echoed Bertie, "killed?"

"Yes; his head was beaten in by a club—just such a club as you were fond of wielding. Oh, Bertie! did you, in your ignorance, kill my father?"

"I?" cried Bertie, clasping his hands, and looking up hideously. "I kill—no, no—and your father? Oh, Howard! did I kill you?"

"No," cried Howard. "Bertie, forgive me—you are innocent, but the crime is laid to your charge, and there is evidence enough to hang you."

"Hang me? How?"

"By the neck with a rope. It is the cruel law of our country to take life by that diabolical means; but do not look so appalled—you are safe here. I must confide in my mother. Stay here, and fear not. I will return with her soon."

Bertie sank down in a chair while Howard was away, revolving in his mind all that he had heard. Everything around him was so strange that he half-doubted its reality, and wondered if it was not one of those dreams which used to haunt him in his cave. He was wondering still when the door opened, and Howard and Lady Forrester appeared.

"Come here, Bertie," said Howard; "this is my mother."

"So you," said Lady Forrester, taking him by both hands, "are the cause of all this strange terror? Why, what a handsome boy you are! Howard has told me of your gentleness with him, and he says that you did not kill my husband."

"No—not kill him," said Bertie, gently; "never kill. I throw stick in rough play, but not to kill."

"Did you throw it that day? Did you hit him?"

"No, no," returned Bertie.

"And I believe you, even as Howard does. There is a world of gentleness at the bottom of your bright eyes. You need not fear; we will shield you here. I think, Howard, that you had better shift to the suite of rooms next to mine, for there is an inner suite, where you can conceal your friend, and lock him away, safe from prying eyes."

"Your advice is good, mother, as it always is. Shall it be done at once?"

"I think so."

The transfer was to the next floor, but it was safely effected, and Bertie was stowed away in those snug little rooms next to those to be occupied by Howard.

Steps were to be taken at once for the clearing of his character, and the discovery of the true murderer, neither mother nor son having now the least doubt about Bertie's innocence, and for this purpose Captain Grit was to be taken into their confidence.

"I am sure he is a good, worthy man," said Lady Forrester.
 "And will be especially useful, as he is lodging at the Griffin," added Howard. "I will ride over and see him to-morrow."
 "But say nothing to him there," said Lady Forrester; "sometimes the very walls have ears."
 "I understand."
 "He discovered your father, Howard."
 "That is the first word I have heard of this."
 "Yes, he discovered him, but he saw nothing of the murderer."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A LITTLE CLEW.

Captain Grit sat in the parlor of the Griffin partaking of his modest breakfast when Howard Forrester rode up on a cob, which he tethered to a post outside before Tubbs could rush out and render him any assistance.

"I've only come to see Captain Grit, Tubbs," he said, "and I shall not be many minutes—the cob will stand very well. This is the door to the parlor, I believe. Well, Captain Grit, how are you?"

"A blessed sight is this," cried the old captain, dropping his bread and butter, and upsetting his cup of tea. "My lad, nothing could be so welcome."

"Thank you," said Howard; "but don't let me disturb you. Finish your breakfast."

"I have finished it," returned the captain, looking at the ruins upon the floor, "and I've had enough. So you've come back, my lad, alive and well. Now tell us where you have been."

"A secret hangs upon that," said Howard, "and about that secret I've come to talk."

"If you have anything to say that you don't want known," said the captain, lowering his voice, "don't say it here."

"Why not?"

"Come for a walk in the fields and I'll tell you."

"I am at your service."

They went out together, and Howard, throwing the reins of the cob upon his arm, sauntered by the captain's side down a lane and into a meadow.

"Now, my lad," he said, "tell me where you have been."

Howard then narrated all that had befallen him, with all that ensued down to the safe storing of Bertie in the unoccupied rooms. The captain listened like a man who had great cause to wonder, but when the story was done he made no comment upon its character. He simply highly approved of the arrangement Howard had made.

"My lad," he said, "you can't keep that poor wild chap too close. I don't think that there is any harm in him, but the general run of people think different—there is a blood-thirsty feeling against him abroad, brought on mostly by fear, but made worse by Tubbs and others, who seem to want to get rid of him."

"This Tubbs has always had the reputation of being a quiet, harmless fellow," said Howard, "but I am afraid that there is more in him than we have suspected. Have you noticed anything in him which may help to bring out the truth?"

"Tubbs was in the wood that day—no doubt o' that," replied Captain Grit, "a dozen people saw him there, and that goes far to bear out what he swears. There's a chap, named Rawson, staying at the house—an old pal of his, and his room is next to mine. Last night, while rummaging in a cupboard, I found a trap which opened into the ceiling of Rawson's room, and I could hear every word he said."

"Was there anything worth hearing?"

"Not then, for he and Tubbs were only talking over a little quiet poaching they had been carrying on, but I heard Rawson say, 'you come here to-morrow night when everybody is in bed and tell me the story,' and Tubbs said 'I will.' Now what the story is I cannot say."

"Whatever it is you had better hear it," said Howard, "I fear much that there were secrets between this man and my unfortunate father which I would fain let rest if I could—but not at the expense of an innocent life. I am sorry to have put upon you the office of eavesdropping, but necessity compels—we must soil our hands a little when we collar a skunk."

"Don't mind me," said Captain Grit, cheerfully, "I will do anything to circumvent this Tubbs, for it's my belief that he's a downright bad 'un. I'll be at my post to-night—ne'er fear."

"And I will be with you," said Howard. "I will climb up the grape-vine and enter your room through the window."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE STORY.

At half-past ten o'clock that night Captain Grit took his candle and made for his room.

Upon the bed sat Howard Forrester, wrapped in one of the blankets to ward off the chill night air. As he had not ventured to close the window, the captain now performed this office, and drew the blinds carefully. Then drawing near, he ventured to whisper:

"All right, mate?"

"Right," returned Howard. "But come to our hiding-place; it is time we were there."

Captain Grit removed his shoes, and Howard, casting aside the blanket, did the same. Then the former led the boy to a cupboard, and opening the door, held the light so as to show Howard a panel.

"If you push," he said; "it will slip aside easily."

Howard did so, and the board noiselessly glided aside, showing a square, dark opening.

"Go in," whispered the captain; "you must lie at full length, but get upon a rafter, as the plaster won't bear you."

"All right," said Howard, and up he went.

He was now inside the ceiling, between that and the roof. Huge rafters ran parallel to each other—wide enough for him to lie upon with ease. Choosing one, Howard stretched himself upon it, and in a few seconds Captain Grit, having extinguished the candle, took up a position on the next.

"Here they are," said the captain.

Rawson came in first, and Tubbs followed him, the latter bringing with him a small mahogany box, which he carefully placed upon the table.

"First, I'll have some grog," said Rawson, "and then for your story."

The grog was brewed and they drew up their chairs to the fire. Tubbs, unlocking the box, produced a few documents, and began:

"First, then," he said, "let us have the beginning—with the brother of Sir Hugh, that was the proprietor of Burnley Hall before Sir Hugh."

"I never heard of him," said Rawson.

"You'll hear of him now," muttered Tubbs, "his name was Charles Forrester and he married a very beautiful woman abroad—something in the Spanish line, but very, very handsome. At this time the estate was in the hands of Sir Groomby Forrester, a bachelor, fond of having all sorts of men attendants about him. Among them was one named Warren, a dumb man, who was, in spite of his affliction a very demon. It was dangerous to cross him in any way, and Sir Groomby was the only man who dared to do it, and of Sir Groomby he was very much afraid. In time Sir Groomby died and the agent sent for Charles Forrester who was abroad, and in a few months he came bringing with him his boy three years old, Hugh Forrester, his younger brother, and your humble servant, who was the confidential attendant upon Hugh. Charles' wife was dead, but the boy was strong and healthy—a very picture of a child—and both Charles and Hugh were handsome men. The day they arrived all the servants were assembled to greet them, with Warren, the dumb man, in a most prominent situation. He was a most repulsive fellow at the best, and the child, on seeing him, shrank back."

"Who is that?" asked Charles Forrester.

"They told him Warren, the dumb attendant of the late baronet."

"He must not remain here," said Charles. "I want no dumb creatures here."

"Charles made a very good provision for him in the way of a cottage and a very decent allowance. This, however, did not satisfy Warren; he had lived all his life at the Hall and wanted to live there still, so he used to come back and hang about the place until Sir Charles was half mad with exasperation. One day he made signs to Warren that if he came again he would beat him. Warren went away sulkily, but on the morrow he was there again, and then Sir Charles broke a horsewhip about his back. Maddened, yet terrified, the dumb man fled and took refuge in his cottage from which he did not emerge for days. At the suggestion of Sir Hugh, I found Warren and urged him to resist the blow Sir Charles had given him."

A slight groan escaped the lips of Howard.

"Sir Charles," continued Tubbs, "was fond of driving about the country in a low trap, alone with his boy, and this habit gave Warren the opportunity he wanted. He chose a lonely part of the wood through which the road ran, and then he lay in wait every day for Sir Charles. At last the opportunity arrived, and it so happened that I was with him at the time. My ears heard the wheels approaching, and signaling to Warren we both crouched down among the ferns. Up came the trap, the child clapping his hands in glee over something the father was relating—a very picture of a child; they passed us; and Warren sprang out with that fearful cry which only escapes those we call dumb. I saw him spring up behind the trap; his knife gleamed for a moment, then plunged into Sir Charles' back."

He swung round, marked who his assailant was, gave one loud shout, 'Bertie!' and expired. Even in that moment he fully grasped the peril of his child, forgot all else, and with one agonized cry, which was a prayer for him, fell heavily into the bottom of the trap. Warren seized the child and plunged into the wood. The horse started, galloped forward, and never stopped until it had borne its dead master to the gates of Burnley Hall. No trace of Warren or the child was ever discovered. The woods here are of vast extent, and hundreds of men lent their aid, but Warren was more cunning than them all, and his hiding-place was never brought to light."

"Was not Sir Hugh married all this time?" asked Rawson.

"Yes, and his wife was in London. He brought her down with just such another boy as that which had been stolen. I have often contemplated stealing him, but I did not know what to do with the child."

"But about the other," said Rawson; "we know something of him now."

"Yes; for he and Wild Bertie are one and the same, I am convinced," replied Tubbs. "That strange cry of his, 'Bertie,' is the one word fixed in his memory by the death-cry of his father. All else has been forgotten in the society of the dumb man."

"What have you in that box?"

"The certificate of Bertie's mother's marriage, the baptismal certificate of the boy, and a miniature portrait of him. These I took from his father's room the day he was murdered."

"And why have you kept them?"

"To confound Sir Hugh; and he defied my evidence as he did me; and when, the other day, I declared that I would proclaim Bertie the true heir, he sat down, calmly, and wrote me out a notice to quit."

"I say, Tubbs," said Rawson.

"Yes," answered Tubbs.

"About the murderer of Sir Hugh—I think I could put my hand upon him."

"On—on Bertie!" stammered Tubbs.

"Pooh, man! the boy had nothing to do with it; but you need not look quite so ghastly. I am not going to interfere; only let me say that you have made a mull of it; and my advice to you is to let the whole business drop. I dare say this wild fellow has gone off, and you will hear nothing more of him."

"Indeed he has not; I know where he is."

"Where?" asked Rawson.

"At the Hall; I saw him by young Howard's window."

"What in the name of Newgate was he doing there?"

"I cannot say," replied Tubbs; "but this I know, that fate, at present, seems to be working against me. He and young Howard are evidently friends; Lady Forrester does not believe my story, and young Howard is working to clear this Bertie from prejudice. I cannot stop now; to save myself I must work to the end. 'Bertie dies,' continued Tubbs, 'others must follow. If Lady Forrester and her precious son were put out of the way at the same time it would not be a bad thing.'

"In what way?"

"There is a will not yet found of later date than that left by Sir Hugh Forrester," rejoined Tubbs. "It leaves a considerable portion of the estate to me in the event of their dying."

"Will that not appear strange?"

"No; it is a well-known fact that I am in Sir Hugh's confidence, and there will be nothing marvelous in his leaving me property which would otherwise go to strangers."

"And this will you have of course in possession," said Rawson, coolly.

"Yes."

"You are a clever fellow," remarked the other.

"The signature was an easy matter," said Tubbs, "for I had fifty copies of his handwriting, and I took impressions of his seals years ago, thinking that they might come in useful. I am not far wrong, you see."

"How will you carry out your purpose?"

"Already the popular feeling is one of rage against young Bertie," cried Tubbs, "and their rage springs from fear. Now, when fear is the guiding spring, a mob will do anything. Lady Forrester is unpopular, and the son is growing so. It will only need a judicious dissemination of the fact that they are keeping this boy in hiding, and then a deputation will attend the Hall to demand his being given up."

"Which will be refused."

"Of course; and then it will only need a little more fuel to set the place ablaze. We are far away from big towns here. We have little or no police. The military are out of reach, and before aid could come—why, who knows what may be done."

"I see, Tubbs, that you have anticipated everything. You are a very clever fellow. Good-night."

And then they parted, each hugging to his heart the belief that he was a very clever fellow, and that this precious scheme

was perfectly laid, and could not fail. Everything, as Rawson said, had been provided for, except their being overheard, and that was likely to put a little hitch into the proceedings.

Rawson got into bed, and was speedily asleep, his nasal efforts being of a very striking and conclusive character. Then Captain Grit and Howard crept cautiously back to the room.

Then the captain did not trust himself with a light, and the pair sat whispering together in the dark.

"A precious pair of scoundrels," said the captain.

"With a precious scheme," returned Howard; "but I will thwart them yet. You must leave this place, and take up your abode with us."

"When?"

"To-morrow, and bring that box if you can."

"I will. Are you going now?"

"Yes, by the way I came. Good-night."

Opening the window cautiously young Howard slipped out, and without making the slightest sound, departed home.

CHAPTER XX.

PREPARING FOR THE ATTACK.

Howard slept but little that night, and at a very early hour on the following morning, had made his mother acquainted with the startling facts which had been revealed to him over night. It need scarcely be said that Lady Forrester was sorely disturbed by what she learned of her husband's early life, and that both Howard and herself felt the humiliation keenly.

Shortly afterward Captain Grit arrived.

"Good-morning, Lady Forrester," he said.

"Welcome, Captain Grit; we have been looking for you."

"I have been detained," said the old seaman; "for I made up my mind to finish with the Griffin right off. This," he added, taking out a parcel from one of his huge pockets, "is the box, I dare say, your son has spoken about; and this," producing a second from another pocket, "is a document of some importance, I believe. May I be so bold as to lock the door?"

"Certainly. Howard will do it."

The door was locked, and the captain opened out his parcel, disclosing a parchment and a good number of paper scraps.

"I got these," he said, "from that vagabond's bedroom. This is the forged will; and these odd bits are the papers he practiced on and copied from. Some look like letters from Sir Hugh; but I haven't gone through them very carefully."

"They are indeed important," said Lady Forrester, looking hastily over them; "there is a deal of matter for our solicitors. Captain Grit, are you ready for a journey?"

"Yes, my lady; anything to serve you."

"You are a good and generous old man. We must away to London at once. I will order the carriage without delay."

"My lady," returned Captain Grit, "it can't be done. The roads were guarded as I came along, and they would not let you pass. But if there be work to be done, I'll away; unless you think I can be of better service here."

"Then go down this staircase here which leads into my private garden" said Lady Forrester, "and this key unlocks the stable door to the right. You will find there my own Arab steed, fleet as the wind, gentle as a child. Saddle her and ride through the adjoining paddock to a foot-path, follow that and two miles away you will come to the high-road. The rest of the way is easy, and send us help as soon as you can."

From a window in the next room they could see the captain start, and thither Lady Forrester and Howard adjourned. In a few seconds he led forth the Arab steed, saddled and bridled, and with the aid of a mounting stool got upon its back.

It was all the affair of one moment, and the next Captain Grit was galloping furiously away, clinging to the saddle after his own peculiar fashion. Lady Forrester and Howard went back to the room they had left, and rang the bell. A minute elapsed, and there was no answer.

"Ring again, Howard."

He rang, with the same result as before. Then he and his mother went out upon the landing. All was still below.

"Deserted," said Lady Forrester, "by the dogs we fed."

"Talking of dogs reminds me that Lion and Nero are out there barking," said Howard. "I will let them in—a good dog is often a true friend."

"Hasten, Howard," replied his mother; "as I fear that we have a great struggle before us."

He hurried down stairs, and she followed him to the hall, where, with her own hands, she proceeded to close the doors and windows. While thus engaged, Howard came back, accompanied by two powerful mastiffs.

The dogs were secured up stairs, and Bertie was favored with the service. They found a very considerable supply of provisions in the larder, which they removed to the rooms above with

all speed, in company with several dozens of wine from the cellar. Then, locking each door as they went, and putting such barricades against them as the furniture permitted, they went above, there to await the attack, or, as they hoped, the party of rescue from Captain Grit.

Close to their place of refuge was the room where Sir Hugh, in his life-time, kept his arms. Lady Forrester and the boys emptied it, and ranged the weapons in the room occupied by Bertie. It was the room furthest from the point of attack, and would therefore be their last refuge. Then mother and son loaded them one by one. Ten fowling-pieces, and eleven brace of pistols.

"Death-power for thirty-two men," said Lady Forrester. "Howard, can you see anything outside?"

"There is a host of men at the other side of the lawn, with Tubbs at their head."

"How many are there?"

"Forty, at least."

"Too many," said Lady Forrester. "If we kill thirty-two, there are eight left."

"They are moving now!" cried Howard. "Moving in a body across the lawn."

"Throw up the window."

"Mother, what would you do?"

"Stop them," replied the brave woman, taking a fowling-piece in her hand. "Let me come, my son."

"Let me stand there?" asked Bertie.

"No, the sight of you would but inflame their ignorant rage. To the last you must be kept out of sight. Open it wide, Howard. I do not fear them."

Howard threw up the sash, and Lady Forrester, with the gun easily poised, took up her position.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHECK.

We must look back for a little to the time when Mr. Rawson was aroused from the land of dreams that morning by the sudden and very abrupt entrance of Mr. Charles Tubbs. The host of the Griffin was much agitated, and, as he shook his friend by the shoulder, there was a look upon his face which showed that he was in no mood to be trifled with.

"Wake up, Rawson!" he cried; "are you dead, man?"

"What's the time?" asked Rawson, yawning.

"Nine o'clock past," replied Tubbs, impatiently. "What matter what time it is. I want you to answer me a question."

"A dozen if you like—fire away."

"Have you been playing me any tricks?"

"What do you mean, Tubbs?"

"Have you been into my room, and robbed me of that box and some papers?"

"Confound you! what do you mean by that?" demanded Rawson, with a savage glare. "Do you think I would rob a friend?"

"Then it is that accursed captain!" cried Tubbs. "Up at once! We must to our work, for the enemy is already in the field!"

"I don't understand you," said Rawson, tumbling his clothes on. "What enemy?"

"We were spied upon last night by the captain and another, whom I believe to be young Howard," said Tubbs. "This house is full of man-traps, and one has been left open in the captain's cupboard. There are footmarks on the vine, and Howard Forrester came and went that way last night. He and Grit were concealed in the ceiling of this room last night."

As soon as Rawson was ready, the two rascals went out.

The farmers and laborers from all points collected, and Tubbs proceeded to address the excited throng.

They were then divided into two parties, and Tubbs and Rawson were chosen leaders. Tubbs took forty men for the front, and Rawson, with twenty men, made for the rear.

The position at the hour of noon was this:

The Hall was deserted by all but Lady Forrester and the two boys. In the rear was Rawson and his men; in the front Charles Tubbs and his men; and Captain Grit in search for aid.

Tubbs resolved not to linger, and after a short and fiery speech, in which he spoke of the fearful pains and penalties likely to follow Bertie's escape from the Hall, he urged the men on to an immediate attack.

"If we but show a bold front," he said, "Lady Forrester will yield."

But others could show a bold front, too, and as he was moving across the lawn, the window was thrown up, and Lady Forrester, gun in hand, confronted him.

"Stand!" she cried, and every man, cowed by the dignity of her presence, stood still. "What do you want here?"

"Give up the wild boy!" shouted the men.

"Do you think that I would give an innocent boy up to men mad with superstitions prejudice?" cried Lady Forrester. "No! Believe me, men, you are led astray. This poor child was not the murderer of Sir Hugh."

"He was," muttered Tubbs; "I saw him do it."

"And let me tell you, men," continued the brave woman, "this Bertie is the long-lost son of Sir Charles Forrester, stolen by the dumb man, Warren, at the instigation of that man who is now leading you to ruin."

"She is mad!" cried Tubbs, and a shout of derisive laughter was the only answer given.

"I see," said Lady Forrester, scornfully, "you are resolved to be blind, and bent upon your own ruin. Stand back there! The man who comes one foot nearer, dies!"

And, nerved by her rage, she brought the gun to the present, and placed her finger on the trigger.

"Are you all children," demanded Tubbs, savagely, "to be confounded by a sorceress? It is she who has brought this scourge upon our neighborhood! Advance at once, and tame the tigress!"

The men rushed on a few paces, and the gun was fired. The bullet whizzed past the ear of Tubbs and lodged in the shoulder of young John, who fell upon his back, with a most dismal howl.

The work was now begun, and the blood of both attackers and defenders was up. Howard and Bertie would have advanced to the window, but Lady Forrester drove them back.

"We cannot afford to risk more than one life," she said, "and mine is valueless."

"I have a thought, mother," said Howard; "this staircase leads to the roof, and the stones of the parapet hurled down upon them would check their attack."

"Go, but give them warning," she said. "Kill nobody needlessly—they act in ignorance."

"All but two, Tubbs and Rawson—they must die! Bertie, come with me."

The roof of the Hall was flat, with a strong parapet, breast-high, all around, the top of which was composed of huge, flat stones, each sufficient to crush out the life of any man. Time and storm had worn away the mortar, and a tolerably strong man could easily have precipitated any of them below.

Howard looked over and beheld the excited mob of men battering at the front door with the butt end of their guns. Taking a handful of mortar, he cast it upon them and then drew their attention to him.

"Stand back," he cried, "if you value your lives."

Their leader made a very angry expression of contempt and bade the men proceed. Howard rather lost his patience, and calling Bertie to his aid, sent over the first stone.

Fortunately for those below they saw it coming and withdrew in time to save themselves. The mass fell with a crash, and splintered into a hundred pieces.

"That boy means mischief," said Roger Cracks.

"There was two of them," said Tubbs, "the other was the wild boy."

"I'd rather not meet him," said one, shrinking back. "We cannot fight devils."

"But we can shoot them," said Tubbs; "there is a fallen tree yonder, bring it and batter the door down. I will take up a position and keep them away above."

A jutting part of the house hid this scene from Lady Forrester, whose ears were on the stretch to catch every sound. She heard the stone fall and the shout which followed it; then looking out, she beheld Tubbs back behind a tree and bring his gun to his shoulder.

With ready determination, too, she brought her weapon to bear upon him, and after a steady aim, fired. Her ladyship was not used to fire-arms, and she only succeeded in breaking one of his fingers, but it made him drop his gun with a burst of rage.

Meanwhile the furious tenantry came forward with the trunk of the tree, and using it as a battering ram, charged the door. Howard and Bertie toppled over two large stones, one of which struck a projecting edge of the house, and bounding out, fell upon one of the foremost men.

It struck him full in the chest, and rolling over, he lay still.

Then came a pause. The assaulting party dropped the battering ram and gathered round the fallen man. They spoke to him and touched him, but he could neither respond to word or touch. In this world he would never do so more, for he was dead. Tubbs besought them to spare none as soon as they had forced their way within the hall.

CHAPTER XXII.

A DARK NIGHT'S WORK.

It was late in the afternoon, for much time had been spent in the attack, and much had been lost in their enforced rest, and the sun in about an hour would dip and leave them in darkness. Tubbs did not care for that; darkness was what he wanted, and prior to the renewal of the assault, he set ten of the men to cut pine wood torches.

"If we cannot take them before night," he said, "we will burn them out."

He appointed scouts to travel from one party to the other to report progress, and for the better purpose of success, organized a simultaneous attack, which would distract the attention and test the power of his active enemies above.

The signal for the charge was the firing of a gun, and as he fired it, two parties of men, inflamed with drink and furious passions, rushed forward. Twice did they charge, and then the door was driven in, and with a shout, the front party flocked into the hall.

A messenger informed the others at the back of their success, and then they too came pouring in, forming altogether a powerful body. The wide staircase pointed the way, and yelling, they rushed up.

Bertie and Howard had rejoined Lady Forrester, and the trio, with the two dogs in leash, awaited the attack behind the locked and barricaded door. By and by the mob of men came tumbling up, smashing the furniture on their way, and yelling like demons. Their footsteps sounded like thunder, as they came tearing along the corridor.

The two dogs grew restless as the noise drew nearer, and their big jaws opened and shut threateningly. Their eyes, generally heavy and sullen looking, almost started from their sockets, and flashed forth fire.

"Lion and Nero will give a good account of themselves," said Howard; "at them, brave dogs!"

The farmers struck the door with their guns, and the dogs barked. As their deep tones rang out, the assaulters paused and drew back.

"They've put the dogs on us!" cried Roger Broom.

"How many are there?" asked Tubbs.

"Two."

"Is that all? Two dogs to sixty men!"

"Ye don't know them dogs," cried Roger, "but if ye be so brave, come to the fore and face 'em."

"I'll come forward," he said, "when the door is open; but there is no hurry; we might have enjoyed ourselves before going to work. Where are the cellars?"

"That be a good thought," cried a voice; "they keep a good wine here, and it's time we tasted it."

So back they hurried to the cellar, which they broke into, and each man helped himself to what he liked best. All were reckless now, and wanted but little to make them ready and ripe for anything.

With each his bottle, they ran back into the entrance-hall, and then began to dance about like maniacs and fools. Tubbs and Rawson, the only two men who did not drink, took the opportunity to reclose the door and nail it up.

"They will have had enough when they have drank that," said Tubbs; "a little more and they will be unfit for work. With the dogs about it must come to a fire. Help me to pile up the furniture."

Rawson and a few of the men then proceeded to pile up the elegant furniture, so as to insure a rapid and destructive fire.

"Why not burn the lot?" whispered Rawson in the ear of Tubbs.

"Eh!"

"Why should any of these fools live to tell the tale? Don't start like that, man. If you dye your soul with blood, why be particular to a shade? It will be easy for us to decoy them all aloft and nail them in the big room adjoining."

"But this is too horrible, Rawson. I dare not do it."

"Your life will be worth nothing if these men are left free. There will be an investigation, and the whole story must come out."

In the meantime the rioting went on below, and when Tubbs and Rawson went down they were assailed with a demand for drink. Rawson was about to refuse them, when a thought struck him.

"Come up and drink, then," he said; "you spoil our work."

They staggered up after him, and he led the way to the drawing-room.

"Make yourselves merry, men," he said. "I will light these candles and close the shutters. It will be better than daylight."

Ay, anything was better than daylight then, and the men

threw themselves upon the gorgeous couches. Rawson fetched them up more drink, and while they lapped it like dogs from plates and dishes, or drank it from the bottles, he went round unheeded and drove strong nails through the shutters. He nailed them hard and fast.

The work in the hall was now complete, and three who had been aiding, he decoyed up stairs to join the orgie.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE YEOMEN'S FATE.

Darkness was now coming on, and the two men went down the stairs. At the bottom Tubbs paused, and the other could see by the faint light that he was deadly pale.

"Rawson," he said, "is there no other way?"

"What do you mean?" asked Rawson.

"Those men—above—must—must they burn?"

"In a short time they will be dead drunk, and long before the flames can touch them they will be smothered. All men must die, and most die painfully. I think it a very merciful death for them."

"I—I have my doubts," said Tubbs, but Rawson was now the master spirit and led him on.

"Where is the jewel-box?" said Rawson.

"You had it last."

"Ah, so I had. I left it in the plate-room."

They walked back, and, just as they reached the plate-room, Rawson said, carelessly:

"Fetch the box, Tubbs, while I get a light."

All unsuspecting, Tubbs went in, and groped about for the box. He could not find it.

"It is not here," he said.

"But you are!" cried Rawson, and the heavy door closed with a bang.

With a shriek which told how fully he realized his dreadful position, Tubbs dashed toward the door, just in time to hear the heavy bolt shoot into the socket. No need for screws there, for that lock would defy the efforts of the strongest man.

"Safe!" said Rawson, coolly.

And then he brought over some of the lighter furniture, and piled it against the door. Over this he emptied a large can of oil, and piled up more.

Then gathering together a lot of loose rubbish, he produced a tinder-box, and after a little of the usual hammering he obtained a light. The pile caught instantaneously, and flared up furiously.

"Good!" he said, and hastening to the hall, he fired the second pile. It caught as well as the first, for the furniture was old and dry. Great tongues of flame leaped up.

Deliberately, so as to make sure that his work was thoroughly done, he went out and closed the door. Outside was the trap, which he had secured from the stable. Into this he jumped, after depositing the valuables he and Tubbs had plundered from the Hall. There he sat for a minute, listening to the roar of the flames within, and watching the increasing light.

"Good!" he said, again. "What can save the house, or those within it now? If I am careful, nobody will know that I have left the spot, and I shall be included in the list of the dead. Get along, my beauty."

Then he gave the horse a touch of the whip, and drove rapidly away.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FIRE.

"Hark!" said Howard, bending down to listen. "I hear a warring and a crackling. Listen to Lion and Nero. How they whine! I know what it is now. It is fire!"

Dread word to break upon prisoners' ears. Lady Forrester sprang up with a cry, and Bertie for a moment was appalled.

"They dare not attack us!" cried Lady Forrester, "so they burn us out, as though we were wolves in a den."

"The window," suggested Bertie.

"It is a fearful height, too," said Howard, throwing up the sash. "Even if we had no enemies below, the risk is great."

"But I will risk it," said Lady Forrester, calmly.

"I have it!" cried Howard; "I will tie the curtains together, and lower the dogs first. If anybody is there, they will give mouth."

It was no time for words, but action, and they all went to work, tearing down the curtains, Howard using his sailor's experience to knot them. As soon as they had sufficient, according to their calculations, Howard brought in the dogs, and bade them lie still.

The dogs were fastened then, and at the words, "Down, Lion! down, Nero!" lay still as mice.

Bertie and Howard hoisted them out of the window, and lowered them to the ground.

"Find them—look about, good dogs!" cried Howard, and the two beasts easily kicked themselves free.

With noses to the ground, they ran round and round, the circle increasing each time, until they suddenly struck some trail, and then bounded into the shrubbery and disappeared.

"There is nobody below," said Howard; "safe thus far."

Lady Forrester was then lowered safely to the garden below.

"Come, Bertie," said Howard, "you first—I can trust you to hold on."

Bertie smiled, and, with the activity of a cat, swung himself out, and rapidly glided down. He had barely touched the ground when Howard joined him. By this time they had discovered the position of the unhappy yeomen.

"But why do they not escape by the windows?" said Lady Forrester, "a heavy fall is better than a death by fire. Let us see."

They hurried around to the spot, and there found the men hammering furiously at the closed shutters. Lady Forrester took in the position at a glance.

"These wretched men," she said, "have been regularly caged. What can be done to save them?"

"Nothing with you here," replied Howard, firmly. "I cannot have you exposed to their fury again. You must fly."

"And leave you here. No."

"You must. Stay—there is the Swiss cottage in the shrubbery facing us. Take refuge there. The door is strong. Bertie and I will get ladders from the stable, and help these wretched men. If they should be so ungrateful as to attack us, we are both fleet of foot, and can fly. We will manage, too, to draw off the pursuit."

"I will hasten to the Swiss cottage," she said, "and if you have cause to fly, come to me. Let us live or die together."

"Well, it shall be so," said Howard; "but go at once, as moments are precious. Bertie, follow me."

He dashed off at a great rate toward the stables, followed by Bertie, and Lady Forrester hurried toward the Swiss cottage. In a minute or so the boys came back, each with a ladder on his shoulder, and an ax in his hand.

To attempt to aid those above was a task of no little danger, but neither of the gallant lads thought of that, or of the peril their lives had been in with the men they now sought to save. With cries of encouragement they planted their ladders, and, running up, began to beat the shutters in.

One—two—three strokes from Bertie sent the strong wood-work flying in every direction, and then hot and eager hands inside tore down the barrier between them and life.

Already the fire was in the room, and the carpet soddened with wine and spirits had caught fire. Some of the men, too, were burning and dancing about in an agony which no pen can depict. Howard beat in his window, and the boys slid down.

Then with shouts and screams the men inside fought to be the first to escape, and for a moment a mass of heads and shoulders blocked the window. The strongest wrenched themselves free and came tumbling out.

Little they recked of the height, and some got terrible falls, but others saw the ladder, and came down it hand under hand. The spectacle was awful—terrible—for the clothes and hair—nay the very flesh of some seemed to be on fire. One man in particular looked like a pillar of fire—he was ablaze from head to foot.

Howard and Bertie stood aside to watch the wonderful scenes apparently unheeded by the men who ran to and fro—yelling hoarsely as if they had all gone stark staring mad. Suddenly one cried out that he had found a pool of water—which proved to be a fountain on the lawn—and into this the frightened creatures plunged, dashing the water over themselves in a frenzy.

This cooled them, and those least burned began to rally, to give aid to the most suffering. Many of the hapless men had sustained terrible injuries, and nearly one third of them, too drunk to be roused even by their great danger, had fallen victims to the fire. Old Broom was but little burned, and he was one of the first to partially regain his senses.

"We wor nailed up," he cried, "and we'll ha' the life o' them. Where be they?"

"You hear that, Bertie?" said Howard, listlessly; "ignorance and prejudice rule them to the last. It's time we made our way to the Swiss cottage. Will Captain Grit never come?"

Before they could get away they were espied by old Broom. The blazing fire made everything as clear as day, and he knew them in a moment.

"The two devils ha' come to see us burn," he cried. "Look here!"

The men still smarting under their injuries were only too eager

to avenge them, and with terrific shouts they rushed upon the boys. Fortunately all their arms had been left behind, but their very numbers compelled Bertie and Howard to retreat.

They turned and fled, making a partial detour and coming up behind some shrubs in the Swiss cottage. The door was open and they dashed in, but the next instant a shout proclaimed that they had been seen.

Howard locked the door and drew the two strong bolts across, but just in time to keep out a dozen furious men who threw themselves against it. Now they were in a trap, for there was but one means of entrance and exit to the cottage, and if the door yielded their lives was not worth a straw.

The rescued men, unheeding all save their mad, unreasoning thirst for revenge, came up in a body, and the voice of old Broom was heard:

"They burned us, let us burn them."

A cry of approbation burst from the men, and leaving half their number to guard the door, the rest dashed away in search of fuel.

CHAPTER XXV.

AT LAST.

"They must burn now," cried half a dozen voices, and a hoarse shout of approval rent the air.

It was answered by the hoofs of steeds and a clang of arms, and then there came riding upon the greensward a troop of soldiers, with their weapons gleaming in the fire-light. At the head of them was a bare-headed, wild-looking old man—Captain Grit.

"We are too late," he cried, "for all save vengeance. Cut them down!"

"At last," cried Howard, "he is here! Mother, we are saved! Bertie, unbar the door."

Bertie threw it open, and plunging boldly out, dashed the blazing fagots aside. In a few seconds he had made a lane, through which Howard now bore his senseless mother. Her strong heart, which had borne her through all, yielded at the moment of joy.

"Spare these wretches!" cried Howard. "We are alive and well."

The old sailor heard the cry, and turned in the saddle so abruptly that he rolled to the ground, and his horse galloped away.

"Alive!" he cried, springing to his feet.

"Yes, my noble friend," said Howard; "but call back your men."

The captain put his hands to his mouth and gave a shout that made the country ring again. The soldiers, who had been galloping after the fugitive yeomen, reined up their steeds and came trotting back.

"You just came in time," said Howard. "Have you a flask? See, my mother is ill. She has suffered much."

"Bless me!" said the captain, "how remiss of me. Yes, here is some wine."

A few drops sufficed to revive Lady Forrester, and as soon as she opened her eyes she became the same brave woman she had been throughout the day. She held out her hand to Captain Grit, and murmured her thanks.

"Where did you pick up my gallant friends?" asked Lady Forrester.

"At a village twenty miles away," replied he. "They were on the march with an officer who had been dining with the parson when I came upon them. Hearing of your danger, he bade me take the men, saying that he would follow me."

"That was not like an English officer."

"No; but this gentleman was very drunk at the time, or he would have known better. However, I got the men, and they are excellent fellows, so we must rest content."

"Certainly."

"We ought to have been here before," continued Captain Grit, "but we were detained on the way by something connected with this day's work. About four miles from here we came upon a man who had been dragged from a light trap by two dogs."

"Lion and Nero," said Howard.

"He was fighting most desperately for his life, and one he had already slain, but the other mastered him, and ere we could effect a rescue, tore his throat to shreds. As we came up he made an effort to speak, but it was too late, and he fell back dead. On the trap we found a jewel-case, with your name, and a bag of plate."

"Plunder from the Hall, no doubt," said Lady Forrester.

"It is safely stowed away at a road-side inn," cried Captain Grit. "What is it, my man?"

One of the soldiers stood before him saluting.

"Another man in the house, sir," he said, with martial brevity.

"Heaven help him! Where?"

"At the back, sir. There is no window, and the men are pulling down the wall to get him out."

The whole party hurried round to the spot which Howard recognized as the back of the pantry, and there already the active soldiers had broken their way half through the wall. In the paddock close by their horses were neatly picketed in company with those they had forced from the stables.

There was a small window just above where they were at work, through which was thrust a man's hand, quivering with pain.

Inside they could see a light burning, and the shrieks of the imprisoned man rent their ears.

No need to bid the soldiers work, for with strong arms and willing hearts they plied pick and bar, tearing down the masonry as if it were tinder. A hole was made, and the head and shoulders of a man came out, and they dragged him through.

The hair of his head and face was gone, and the skin, scorched and blistered, was so awful to look upon that those who stood by sickened at the sight. His clothes were tinder, and the back of his coat was smoldering.

"Water!" he gasped, and they gave him some, but his parched mouth and tongue were powerless to drink.

"Too late!" he groaned. "Lay me down and let me die. Oh, Heaven! how I have suffered. Surely this will atone."

"Who is this?" asked Lady Forrester, drawing near. "I cannot recognize your face."

"I am Tubbs, the author of this hellish work!" he answered; "the one man who urged on those superstitious fools. You know me now."

"Now that you proclaim yourself," she said; "but can nothing be done for you?"

"No," he said, becoming suddenly calm, "for I am losing all pain, and I know what that means. In an hour at the most I shall be dead. Let me, ere I die, make a confession. Your husband died by my hand."

"May Heaven forgive you," she murmured.

"Oh, that it may!" he cried, in bitter anguish. "I came behind him as he paused to listen in the wood, and beat in his skull. At first I hoped it would be thought that he had dashed out his brains against a tree, but later on I falsely charged that boy. Can one or all forgive me? I am dying, miserably, and going to that great eternity which may be so awful to me. Can you forgive me?"

They told him, and told him truly, yes. This seemed to content him, and he closed his eyes. One of the men asked him if he would like to be moved, and he murmured something which they could not catch. As he was in some danger from the falling building, they carried him to the grounds in front, and laid him upon a sloping bank. He seemed to be quite insensible to pain, and opened his eyes, with a sad smile upon his face.

"I am grateful," he said. "I learn too late that there is goodness in the world; I never believed it before. Don't punish my wife, as she had no hand in anything. Lady Forrester, you are a woman, and will be kind to a woman, I am sure. Don't let her starve for my sins, dark and hellish as they have been."

"She shall not starve," said Lady Forrester. "Howard, bring him some water."

They moistened his lips, and he tried to utter his thanks. The effort was too much for him, and he closed his eyes again. He lay quite still, and after a pause they spoke to him. He returned no answer, for he had gone to the great unknown country from whence no traveler returns.

CHAPTER XXVI.

EXEUNT.

Burnley Hall was burned to the ground, and scarcely one stone remained upon another. The very night of the catastrophe Lady Forrester and all her friends rode away, guarded by the soldiers who had come with a timely rescue. By the morrow the real truth of the story was known, and the victims of the cunning of Rawson and Tubbs and their own miserable folly, hid their heads in shame.

The wife of the wretched man who had died last was the means of circulating the story, and she told the peasantry how the "sorceress" and "the two boy-devils" had called upon her on their way from this place, and given her the means to bury her criminal husband, telling her at the same time to keep her house and home. The outline of the true story was also confided to her, and she told it to the sobered yeomen, who

wept with remorse, and almost cursed the day that they were born.

There was mourning in many a house, and fear in all, for they could not but think that vengeance, swift and sure, would be taken; but the days and weeks passed on, and accumulated into years, without one word or sign from those whom they had so grossly injured.

A thirst to atone gathered in the peasants' hearts, and many besought the agent who collected the rents to give to their absent lady and her son the assurance of their earnest repentance. His answer was that Lady Forrester was then away, and would not care to be troubled with such matters.

Again time rolled on until the world was nine years older, and then one day there came down a band of men, skilled mechanics and laborers, who collected the fallen masonry of the old house, and built it into a huge cross upon the same spot.

"She will never return now," the yeomen said, and felt like men banished and accursed.

But when the cross was done, the busy men began to build two houses upon the summit of a hill hard by, and others planned handsome grounds and planted trees. The houses were very fine, and the grounds spacious, but in two years all was complete, but then somehow it got whispered about that the two young Forresters, Bertie and Howard, were coming home.

"We are forgiven indeed," said the yeomen and peasantry, and they went about with lighter hearts. The earth seemed to smile upon them again; they were beginning the world anew. They poured out their savings, and made great preparations to welcome home those they had so wronged.

Bertie and Howard came at last—both handsome men indeed, and each with a bride—and with them Lady Forrester and old Captain Grit, who had been married for three years. Yes, married; the sterling woman had married a sterling man, and was happy with him. So he had his reward.

Without one word or look to show that aught of the past was remembered, Bertie and Howard welcomed their tenants, and at a feast Howard announced that the estate had been divided between him and his cousin.

"I have no claim to a rood of ground," he said; "but it is the only condition on which my noble cousin will accept even part of his own, and I must yield perforce."

They toasted and cheered the cousin, and when the day was done, many a man, as he wandered home, marveled and wondered if the old story of the wild boy was not a dream, and whether Sir Bertie Forrester had not always been what he was, then, a refined, handsome gentleman; but while they wondered, they looked up before them, and saw the cross, with the moonlight shining on it, to remind them that all was indeed true—that the burning of Burnley Hall was indeed honestly recorded; and that cross, now gray with age, speaks to doubters still, and tells them that not a hundred years have passed since such things were; but near it is an embankment along which the fiery engine whistles and proclaims that the march of civilization has wiped away the folly and superstition which led to such deeds, and tells us that there they can never be done again.

[THE END.]

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